



Marriage Prep 101



Helping Couples Create a Lifetime Together

Marriage-Bound or Just living together?

by Drs. Patrick and Michelle Gannon

Cohabitation--the official term for living together- is a hot topic these days in the marriage study field. In early July, researcher Scott Stanley reported that women who are living together with a man and expecting to get married are often disappointed by their partner. It turns out that men who choose to live with a woman first rather than marry her are far less committed to marriage in general and their cohabiting partners in particular than the group of men who commit to marriage without first "testing the relationship out". This surprising finding, presented at the 2002 Smart Marriages conference in Washington, D.C., to some 1600 marriage educators, researchers and therapists is based on two recently released, nationwide surveys.

Stanley's findings are consistent with those of another study reported this past June by David Popenoe at the Rutgers Marriage Project that elaborated on the reasons behind the data. He found that men who drift into a marriage as an inevitable next step in a cohabiting arrangement or are responding to pressure from the woman to "make it official" show low commitment to the relationship overall and were both reluctant to get married as well as not as less likely to stay in the marriage over the next 10 years. The new research also shows that among co-habiting couples, 50% marry within five years, 40% break-up and 10% continue living together indefinitely. Considering that the 2000 Census showed that 50-60% of all new marriages involved couples who previously lived together, these findings are stirring up controversy in bedrooms across America.

Reasons Behind the Findings

While these findings are provocative, the authors of the studies are not fully clear about what is driving these changes in attitudes, values and behaviors about marriage. We do know that the national marriage rate (percentage of all individuals getting married) has been falling in recent years as the co-habitation rates have been rising. Couples have also delayed getting married because of extended schooling, a desire to put one's career first and the need to save for a down payment on a house. Women figure prominently in this new social development due to their desire to delay pregnancy and establish independent lives. Finally, there is no longer any social stigma attached to living together so that couples can consider this option based solely on preference, convenience and other practical realities.

Although cohabitation is not as popular in American as in Europe--where it is clearly seen a viable alternative to marriage- for some Americans it is becoming just that--a more preferred and stable living arrangement. Among those who have been previously divorced, hurt by past marriages or elderly (who have specific financial and custodial arrangements in place), cohabitation appears to be functioning as an alternative to marriage and remarriage. And among the Generation X population, many of whom grew up in divorced families, cohabitation may seem a reasonable next (and extra) step on the commitment continuum from serious dating to engagement. In this way,



Marriage Prep 101



Helping Couples Create a Lifetime Together

living together represents a less risky proposition than "taking the leap" that marriage represents for so many.

In our Marriage Prep 101 workshops which is offered to "pre-engaged, engaged and newlywed couples, roughly half of all couples report living together prior to marriage. Some of these couples are taking the workshop to sort out specific relationship issues before going ahead with the formal engagement. Based on our experience and combined with some data from a small, non-scientific survey we have conducted, a number of interesting developments are emerging that may help couples who are living together gain some clarity about their reasons, options and expectations for themselves and their partners.